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Reducing Stress among Students

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The purpose of this report is to help college faculty increase students' learning by reducing stress among students. Because this report addresses the role of teachers and students, it is helpful first to explore the relationship between teaching and learning. The relationship between teacher and learner essentially poses problems of human relations. Teachers bring more than knowledge to the relationship; they are motivators, experts, judges. Teachers and learners share responsibility for learning, and some question whether "teaching" has occurred if no "learning" occurred.

Studies of teaching that produces the most learning suggest that "effective" teachers use an analytical and synthetic approach to the subject matter, organize the material well to make it clear, and establish rapport with their students. Most studies identify enthusiasm as important in promoting students' learning. The key seems to be to make college courses challenging but not threatening.

How Does Stress Affect Learning?

Many stress models emphasize a "mismatch" between the individual and his or her environment. Both too little and too much stress inhibit learning. Stress is difficult to define because individuals react to it very differently, and a situation that is stressful for one person may not be for another. Further, stressed individuals vary widely in the effectiveness of their coping.

Some college students, when stressed by academic demands, use ineffective mechanisms for coping: They may use "defensive avoidance", for example avoiding studying and putting off writing assignments. Teachers can help such students develop more effective mechanisms for coping through "stress inoculation" — managing their courses so that students have information about what to expect, giving feedback on their progress, and providing a degree of control over course activities.

What is the Value of Feedback and Control?

Feedback is information about current performance that can be used to improve future performance. When given properly, feedback can encourage positive stress that motivates students to action and can discourage the negative stress that inhibits action.

Teachers can take specific steps to give effective feedback: (1) helping students know where they stand, (2) setting up "learning loops," (3) providing written comments on students' work, (4) testing often enough, and (5) arranging personal meetings to discuss students' work.

Having a personal sense of control is an important factor in reducing stress. When students do not know what to expect in their courses, they feel out of control. Teachers can help students have a greater sense of control by using requests rather than commands, giving students choices in course requirements, explaining assignments so students know their purpose, involving students in the design of examinations, and soliciting and using feedback from students to improve courses and teaching.

College teachers who can effectively use feedback and control in their classroom create a climate ripe for learning. Students are relaxed but motivated to learn when they have an instructor who provides direction and feedback and who is willing to accept it in return.

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What is the Value of Interaction Between Faculty and Students?

Studies of college teaching support the view that the frequency and quality of teachers' contact with students, inside and outside the classroom, affect students' involvement in their own learning. Positive teacher-student relations have been linked to students' satisfaction with college, their educational aspirations, and their academic achievement. And when students perceive their teachers as partners in the educational process, they are more likely to take on new and difficult tasks.

To improve their relationships with students and enhance students' learning, teachers can provide structure at the onset of a course, encourage class participation, get to know students by name, mobilize student tutors and study groups, use appropriate humor and persona stories, be "professionally intimate," be accessible outside of class, develop advising skills, and be open to the role of mentor.

In general, students feel less stress and cope more effectively with stress if they feel they belong to the academic community. Faculty can play a key role in introducing and welcoming students to that community.

What Is the Value of Stress Awareness?

While teachers are not therapists, they can be helpful to stressed students. By demonstrating "friendly" attributes, teachers can become aware when students are stressed and help them cope more effectively. Specifically, they might help students with stress reactions, maximize the outcome of meetings with students, recognize severe stress that warrants referral to professional mental health counselors, and disclose their own thoughts and feelings about the course work.

The dropout rate between freshman year and expected graduation year may be as high as 50 percent. For many students, dropping out of school represents a personal loss and failure; for many students in school, ineffective coping contributes to clinical depression. Suicide is a tragic consequence that possibly could be avoided by greater self-awareness. While faculty are not responsible for the well-being of those they teach, college teachers can make an important difference.

What Can Students Do?

Professors should keep in mind that the goal is not to eliminate all stress but to help students develop a variety of skills to cope with the negative aspects of stress.

To assist students, faculty can recommend a number of strategies: (1) improving study habits, (2) managing time wisely, (3) learning positive self-talk, (4) learning how to relax, and (5) joining a student support group.

If students try strategies for coping and still experience the negative aspects of stress, then faculty should encourage students to seek professional counseling or therapy. This suggestion will more likely be received and acted upon if a good relationship between teacher and student already exists and if teachers are aware of what stress is.

Concluding Recommendations

The guiding principle of stress reduction is "stress inoculation," suggesting a preventive approach so that the negative aspects of stress can be avoided. Stress inoculation involves giving people realistic warnings, recommendations, and reassurances. Hence, this report has focused on the value of feedback, faculty-student relationships, and stress awareness.

Stress inoculation is associated with giving people information. Yet little research in the field of higher education describes how best to inform students about the challenges of higher learning. Research in the field of combat and health care demonstrate mixed results regarding the value of information. Thus, a need exists to identify the factors that influence the helpfulness of information in reducing stress.

More research is needed to identify the constructive side of professional intimacy, self-disclosure, and mentoring. Further research could determine why and how teacher-student relationships deteriorate and help faculty construct more successful relationships.

Further research is needed to describe the learning that occurs when one teaches another. Research at lower levels suggests that "to teach is to learn twice." Better understanding this phenomenon at the level of higher education could lead to new teaching strategies. And more research is clearly needed to understand stress among faculty.

NOTE: This digest is a summary of ED 274 264

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ABSTRACT

Ways that college faculty can increase students' learning by reducing stress are identified. Consideration is given to: the effects of stress on learning, the value of feedback and control, the importance of the interaction between faculty and students, the value of stress awareness, and what students can do. When given properly, feedback can encourage positive stress that motivates students to action and discourages the negative stress that inhibits action. Specific steps by which teachers can give effective feedback include: helping students know where they stand, providing written comments on students' work, testing often enough, and arranging personal meetings with students. Ways that teachers can improve their relationships with students and enhance students' learning include: providing structure at the onset of a course, encouraging class participation, getting to know students by name, and mobilizing student tutors and study groups. Students can reduce stress by improving their study habits, managing time wisely, learning positive self-talk, learning how to relax, and joining a student support group. A need exists to identify factors that influence the helpfulness of information in reducing stress. (SW)

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